

ANTISEMITISM & THE CHALLENGE OF THE ISRAELI PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore and open out how antisemitism is currently manifesting or being alleged in activist circles. It is written mainly for those who have encountered debates around the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict but have not necessarily explored the arguments and counter-arguments in the context of antisemitism and anti-racism – or who have not experienced much in the way of racism / antisemitism.

There are many struggles around the world, but few have the potency of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. As well as being at the heart of real, everyday struggles within those lands, it plays a role in global politics. As such, it has become a topic around which resistance from the political left to capitalism and imperialism coalesces. This can be seen, for instance, in how regularly the issue appears on campus and in the strength of campaign groups allied to both Israelis and Palestinians.

The Conflict is a persistent point of contention where left and right mobilize, its symbols being picked up by political activists on all sides, whether the keffiyeh worn by the Left or the Israeli flag waved by the Islamophobic English Defence League. Thus, the Conflict has become a screen on which the politically active of all stripes project issues that arguably have more to do with their own politics than the struggles in Israel and Palestine – for all that the symbols remain rooted in the current oppression of peoples.

When approaching the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories [OPT], we cannot barge in with our standard, pre-formed concepts that work for struggles in the West. It is possible to see opposition to the Conflict as merely an extension of resistance to US imperialism or as support for the struggles of an oppressed people to obtain national liberation. However, in reducing the issue to such black and white terms, we end up with narratives of good and bad that miss out much of the reality on the ground; narratives that are, let's face it, too often racist.

There is a fundamental inconvenience to the Israel-Palestine Conflict: there are genuinely two sides to take into account. Both have grains of truth in their perspectives and the power of such truths is that they cannot be simply dismissed, not if we want our anarchism to be consistent at least. Yet, most of what is said and written is divisive as it favours or ignores one side for the other.

Thus, the starting point of this article is one of solidarity with all. That is, in supporting the struggles of the Palestinian peoples, it is important that I am not antisemitic; in resisting antisemitism I should not slip into racist anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab positions.

Mostly this can be traced to the fundamentally liberal politics¹ of commentators and groups who do not have the critiques that anarchism provides. However, what they write is true within the perspective of the world they are engaging with – one where liberal democracy and nation states are seen as a given, an ideal even. This is true of many groups on the Left, from progressive social democrats to Marxists who have yet to shake off the dangers of statist positions. The problem is that anarchists can be quite bad at applying their political critiques to their own positions and without that critique, slip back into the dominant, liberalism-inspired language and approaches.

¹ By *liberal*, I do not mean centrist politics but the wider ideology formed in the period of the Enlightenment and gave rise to liberal democracies, statehood, universal human rights, etc. See *Political Ideologies*, Anthony Heywood.

A number of common features emerge from observing various discussions:

1. The meanings of words such as antisemitism and Zionism vary considerably, and the differences in the way they are used is not being noticed.
2. Debates regularly apply anarchist principles to a national / liberal, statist situation, as if this can work in a straightforward way.
3. The principles of anti-racism as a way of combating oppression are rarely applied, for all that anti-racist positions are proclaimed.
4. In 'supporting' one side, there is lack of practical consideration of how the other side will perceive the support or react, especially where throwaway phrases are the norm.

It typifies how unnuanced debates rarely produce consensus.

I should point out that the purpose of this article is not to provide 'answers' or to propose 'solutions' to the Israeli-Palestine Conflict. Rather it is about the debates between anarchists and their political kindred outside the East Mediterranean² region who want to show solidarity with those oppressed by states and other authorities but avoid being tripped up by liberalism, nationalism and the interests of political elites.

Being accused of racism or antisemitism is a powerful insult. However, the majority of people who raise concerns over behaviours and attitudes do so because they genuinely perceive that racism/antisemitism is occurring, even if there is disagreement over the definitions being applied. Thus, an accuser's allegations, experiences and emotions should be taken seriously. Treating such accusations as merely an insult is in danger of perpetuating privilege by not acknowledging the weight that comes with such concerns.

Unfortunately, some use the accusation of antisemitism as a political tool to shut down debates, which in turn damages anti-racist struggles by disrupting groups whether internally or through their relationships with others. Hence, there is an additional challenge in how we confront ourselves and others over positions held honestly but which lead them, and us, unwittingly, down antisemitic paths. And that in doing so, we do not play into the hands of less scrupulous manipulators of public opinion, who serve agendas at odds to our own. We must be honest when applying this argument: that it is not distracting from the real challenge of facing up to the fact that someone has experienced racism, and that it is much more a part of life for some people than for others.

There is no straightforward, unambiguous way; having read over three hundred articles from every perspective in preparation for this one, it is about the only thing I am sure about. And if there is to be a way through it all, then it will be informed by consistently applied anarchism. What I hope to do is to dissect some of the issues so that debates can move on from their current, rather simplistic forms.

2. Definitions & Explorations

2.1 "Old" Antisemitism

Antisemitism has been around for thousands of years – literally. There are plenty of resources available. This article only considers the general form it has taken. There are three main recurrent motifs or themes ('tropes') which can be identified as explicitly antisemitic:

- I. the blood libel;
- II. the all powerful Jewish conspiracy / lobby;
- III. the Jew as the 'other' / 'different'.

² Pointed out by some Israeli and Arab anarchists as a less European-centric term than Middle/Near East.

The 20th Century added a fourth:

IV. Holocaust denial & erasing history.

Standard approaches to identifying racism apply to the historical hatred of Jews, but these four tropes form distinct strands which have been used to particular effect as part of the oppression of Jews across the globe, thus they are sensitive issues in their own right. As pointed out in April Rosenblum's *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, they continue to inform the present, whether creating fears or shaping manifestations of actual and overt antisemitism.

In comparison with "new" antisemitism, discussed below, all four are incontrovertible forms of antisemitism which should be challenged whenever they appear. Unfortunately, some of the imagery is not always clear cut but plays on more general symbols available. We explore this in the section on applying the principles of anti-racism.

I. The Blood Libel

Historically, an excuse for pogroms against Jews was the supposed sacrifice of Christian children for satanic rites. Related to this is the crass assertion that it was 'the Jews who killed Jesus'. Basically, there is a theme accusing Jews of deliberately shedding blood, which at various points in time has been used to justify murderous persecution.

This trope is still very much alive in, for example, the statements of President Ahmadinejad of Iran³ and amongst the evangelical African-American churches of the Southern USA.⁴

It repeats itself in depictions of Israelis, i.e. Jews, bathing in the blood of Palestinian peoples (e.g. Latuff's cartoons). It is a standard metaphor for cruelty and violence that has been used to depict non-Jews as well. However, within the Jewish experience as a whole, it has a particular resonance.

Ila. The all-powerful Jewish conspiracy

While the blood libel was the dominant form of antisemitism in pre-industrial era, the conspiracy trope has held that place during the 20th and 21st centuries. Its premise is two-fold:

- (i) All Jews are united as a single group with a common aim.
- (ii) That aim is world domination.

A key text is the Tsarist Russian forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* which has been used by people from Hitler to Ahmadinejad to justify calls for the extermination of the Jewish people. It remains popular among right-wing antisemites and conspiracists and in Eastern Mediterranean countries. When people talk of the 'pinko-commie-bolshevik-capitalist-jewish'⁵ world conspiracy, it is this and similar stuff they rely on. Any self-respecting anarchist should run a mile from it.

As well as the odiousness of its right-wing hate language, this form of conspiracy theory compounds its racism when it implicates every Jewish person regardless. Regular themes are that the Federal Reserve is supposedly in the control of a cabal of Jewish bankers who use it to control the governments of the world and that Jews working in the Twin Towers were 'told to not go to work' on 9/11. In these ways antisemitism dresses up old themes in new clothes, burying itself under a cloak of respectability within popular topics. This can make it harder to recognise, leading to resistance from anyone who does not immediately see the connection.

Even where only a section of the Jewish people are singled out as having control, e.g. the

³ See various speeches before the UN, and elsewhere; interestingly has led to him being criticised by Fidel Castro.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/09/castro-no-one-has-been-slandered-more-than-the-jews/62566/>

⁴ *Antisemitism in America*, Leonard Dinnerstein, 1996.

⁵ Though there are clear distinctions between capitalists and communists, the conspiracist sacrifices them for whatever is most expedient for their confused world-view, particularly where 'the Jew' is the scapegoat for all that is wrong in the world.

Rothschilds, the underlying message remains that it is their Jewishness that is the problem.

Disinterest in dealing with these issues from the Left, who tend to just write it off as right-wing fringe material, means that people who are open to new ideas are easily preyed upon by those peddling this material. Thus we see the likes of David Icke hanging around the Occupy movement.

Iib. The Jewish Lobby

The notion of an all powerful Jewish lobby is an important variation on this, as it is a key route of antisemitism into current Left thought – generally through claims that the 'Jewish Lobby' drives US Foreign Policy.

What is being assumed here is:

- (i) that a real pro-Israel lobby represents all Jews;
- (ii) that this lobby is all powerful.

It uses the same ideas used to justify antisemitism coming from the right-wing. This is not to say that there is not a pro-Israel lobby or various Jewish organisations that lobby, but the same is clearly the case for many other people and interests. The Jews are not the only people in town. It also ignores the fact that political elites have their own imperialistic agendas and Jews are not to blame for that – or Israel for that matter.

When the pro-Israeli lobby is singled out in this way, it is too easy to invoke the antisemitic cabal trope singling out Jewish representatives in a way that no other people are. Thus, it plays into an existing narrative which we cannot control and cannot change to make campaigning easier.

IIIa. 'The Jew' as the Other

Racism is not just actions, but includes processes as well. In one such process, 'the Jew' becomes the alien, the outsider, onto whom fear is projected. At the same time Jews as a people are made homogeneous, distinctions between them erased in favour of the singular 'Jew' who represents everything, usually bad, that can be projected onto them. An entire people are abstracted into an idea and it is the idea that becomes the repository for the hate. Thus Jews are dehumanised and abuses justified. Every Jew can be held accountable for the sins of all other Jews, whether supposedly eating children, killing Jesus or having responsibility for financial upheavals.⁶

Another way in which this appears, particularly among 19th century political writing (anarchist and Marxist included) is the notion that Jews cannot be 'assimilated' into the dominant culture because they are too different in some way. This refusal to bow to 'universal ideals' (and the dominant culture that goes with them) makes them both dangerous and undesirable in this view.

Often this serves a political end: whether getting rid of cumbersome debts (various European kings) or turning them into scapegoats that hide the real culprits (the Nazi party in the wake of the upheavals of the Weimar Republic). While people are focusing on the Jews as the cause of the problem they are not paying attention to the rest of the elite...

There are clear parallels today with the process taking place against Muslims (though that is not a new situation when one considers the Crusades, etc), both casting them as the convenient 'other' to be feared and whose culture cannot be 'assimilated' into the liberal democratic norms of the West.

IIIb. 'The Jew' as inferior

Connected to the above trope is that of Jews being singled out as 'different', or simply inferior. It

⁶ See, for example, *Living in End Times*, Slavoj Zizek, 2010.

was part of the Modernist formation of antisemitism⁷. that the Jew was biologically inferior and 'contaminating', so represented a threat to society, whether through being innately criminal and amoral in nature, or threatening genetic purity.

The term 'Anti-Semitism' was coined in the late 19th century as a way of making hatred of Jews respectable in scientific circles.⁸ The word 'Semites' referred to the biblical tribe of Shem, from whom all Jews, Palestinians and Arabs supposedly descend. It was nominally used as a classification but at the same time as a way of marking these peoples as inferior. The literature of the time makes it clear that it was meant to mainly apply to Jews.

Racial Essentialisation

When people state that 'Palestinians are Semites' too, what is going on is 'racial essentialisation'. This is the notion that there are easily-defined racial categories that can be reduced to simple characteristics, usually biologically based, and that people can be neatly assigned to them. Racism studies – and real life – regularly show just how problematic this is.

The biological notion of Semitism is still used to justify racist positions. For example, "Palestinians are Semites also, so it is not possible to be antisemitic in defending Palestinians", or "Israel is being antisemitic", etc. Even that antisemitism is an invention of Zionists. Explicit use by left-wingers of these arguments is unfortunately quite widespread, not so much demonstrating an inherent antisemitic position, but showing how easily weak analysis can lead one down that path, despite good intentions. Use of this argument also fails to take into account how Palestinians or Jews might feel about this *ad hoc* categorisation, or even having the term Semite applied to them.

IVa. Holocaust denial

Downplaying the Holocaust denies the suffering of Jews, whether what was directly experienced or the wider trauma it induced on Jewish peoples as a whole. Deliberately downplaying suffering is an insidious form of oppression.

The Holocaust is about more than Israel, or even Jews, but the wholesale slaughter of many peoples of different backgrounds of whom the Jews were the most numerous. It stands in its own right and appealing to it in order to win an argument is offensive.⁹ Any comparison with a particular form of genocide must be respectful of those who suffered and died. In an arena of contention such as the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, it generally only serves to muddy the waters, regardless of which side makes the comparisons.

Often, the attack on the Holocaust is tied in with claims that it was catalysed by the Jews for their own interests, and the facts have subsequently been exaggerated by them, i.e. tying in with the conspiracy trope. While some Zionist leaders of the mid-20th Century may have engaged in unholy alliances with fascists, this does not negate the fact that the Holocaust was a horrendous act of genocide and that those 'leaders' are not representative of all Jews. As the foundation of Israel is so intimately connected with the Holocaust, denial has been used as a tool for attacking Israel itself, something we will explore later under the delegitimisation of Israel.

Few other genocides have such a broad cultural resonance as the Holocaust. This makes it far more likely to be used as everyone understands what happened to some degree, and it has been heard of far more than say the Bangladeshi or Armenian genocides. This is not to say the word is to be used solely for what the Nazis did. Other victims of genocide use the expression to draw attention to their

⁷ *Anti-Semitism and National Socialism*, Moishe Postone (available on Libcom.org); see also some of his other writing.

⁸ *Antisemitism: A very short introduction*, Steven Beller, 2007.

⁹ In relation to this see Goodwin's Law - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodwin%27s_Law_Of_Usenet.

own terrible suffering. The problem arises when it becomes a common term to create emotive responses around other events that do not compare, which devalues the word and with it the suffering it represents.

Increasingly, referencing the Holocaust is a political tool, both inside and outside Israel, which has encouraged its use on all sides in current debates. This politicization of the Holocaust has been criticised by various Jewish communities.

IVb. Erasing history

Holocaust denial is part of a wider problem in which the histories of Jews is suppressed or outright denied. It contributes to antisemitism when dominant cultures fail to recognise the vast divergence in experience and culture that comes under the banner of 'Jew'. This ties very much in with the homogenising aspect of the all powerful Jewish lobby/conspiracy and 'Jews should know better' antisemitic tropes. In racism it is a common complaint that the histories of various peoples are deliberately ignored or suppressed as inconvenient to the dominant mythology.

This is equally true within Jewish culture in Israel where the political system is dominated by the Askhenazi at the expense of Mizrahi Jews whose identity, culture and experiences are downplayed, and there is a concerted anti-Arab narrative which seeks to deny Palestinian identity and history in academic or social institutions.

Dubious Alliances

It is worth pointing out that no nation has emerged fully formed and unsullied by the action of its creation. As anarchists we should appreciate this more than most. So, we can point to Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement, and others in his tradition who sought to use antisemitism as a way of promoting their own agenda, including colluding with the openly antisemitic Nazi party. This is not an excuse to denigrate Israel as it is in some quarters, but likewise there is a failing on behalf of pro-Zionists to acknowledge this aspect of the movement's history.

While often used to challenge Israelis, equally dubious alliances occur among Palestinian and Arab nationalists. As anarchists none of this should be a particular surprise to us, but we should be on the watch for double-standards when one side is being subjected to accusations that apply to both.

2.2 Zionism & Anti-Zionism

Zionism is the historical aspiration of the Jewish people to a homeland, particularly in Palestine. It is a modern development, growing out of the 19th Century school of thought that produced Italian and German forms of ethnicity based nationalism.

In its simplest form, it refers to Jewish people having a state of their own – a Jewish nationalism, so to speak. However, it comes in many varieties and there is a history of many Jews not accepting it for various reasons. Hence there is no universal definition and for different Jews it means different things depending on their historical and cultural context.

Currently, the dominant form is *political Zionism* – that is, the taking of a pro-Israeli stance. Even this definition has its difficulties. For some it means that any criticism of Israeli government policy is wrong; for others it keeps the recognition of the importance of Israel's existence for Jews, both there and across the world, but retains the right to criticise the Israeli government.

Given the complexities around the word Zionism, it is not surprising that anti-Zionism is just as problematic. Many on the left consider themselves anti-Zionists and use this term as a shorthand for opposition to the colonising and repressive aspects of the Israeli state. However, when the word Zionism is used without being specific or distinctions made, it strengthens right-wing

interpretations of anti-Zionism, whether European crypto-fascist extremists or political elites who would like to see anti-Zionism discredited (Israeli elites included).

As a result, an anti-Zionist position can be seen by some as a call for the eradication of Israel, which, within the liberal ideology informing the subconscious political outlook of the West, can amount to an antisemitic position, rather than just the standard anarchist anti-state position.

Compounding this is the use of anti-Zionism as a cover term for antisemitic positions when antisemitism itself becomes politically embarrassing. This was used by Stalin and his ilk to justify oppression of Jews¹⁰, while right-wingers speak of the 'International Zionist Conspiracy' or 'Forces of International Zionism'.

These are obvious cases, but things are rarely this clear-cut. For those who are genuinely trying to avoid antisemitism but use anti-Zionism as the way to avoid it, there are several pitfalls. Firstly, it imposes a personal definition of Zionism on the argument failing to recognise it as a term with a wide meaning, including a historical one. Secondly, it reproduces the 'good Jew / bad Jew' trope: in medieval times Jews could avoid persecution by converting; here the Jew is expected to convert to a more 'acceptable' political position that they do not get to shape, i.e. is imposed on them by others.

From a Palestinian perspective, Zionism is not the abstract concept it is outside the Eastern Mediterranean but a practical aspect of life. They live with the everyday impact of expansionist Zionism in all its forms, from the original (and ongoing) appropriation of their land and forced 'transfers' to the discriminatory policies and practices of the Israeli state and its institutions.

Thus, while there is a need for pro-Palestinian support groups to recognise that Zionism is not simply anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab in nature, there is also a need for pro-Israel commentators to recognise that it is not experienced solely from their perspective. It has equally strong negative connotations, denial of which amounts to airbrushing over the repression being carried out in its name. It is not for others to say to Palestinians that they can or cannot name their oppression with the label of Zionism; it would be tantamount to saying people of colour should not name their oppressors as white people. The onus is on those with the position of privilege not to allow oppression to happen in their name and to focus on challenging their own communities, rather than seeking to impose a language or framework on those experiencing the oppression.

For anarchists, the nationalist aspect of Zionism is a stumbling block. Yet on the other hand, one cannot have the right to self-determination for the Jewish people and then deny them the right to have a place to do it. So, regardless of the rights and wrongs of the creation of Israel in 1948 and the racist nature of any ethno-democratic state, there is a fundamental challenge to reconcile these two needs. This difficulty arises as we have a world dominated by liberal politics with its focus on nation-states. I will return to this below. However, it is worth noting that in many of the statements by Israeli anarchists or various other international groups, there is avoidance of the term Zionism.

2.3 'New' Antisemitism

'New Antisemitism' is a term used to describe antisemitism on the Left that has appeared around the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Normally it refers to the point where criticism of Israel becomes demonisation, though this point is hard to define. Often the antisemitism tropes are recycled versions of 'old' antisemitism, whose impact and cultural references are poorly understood. There are three places where the label has been applied:

1. Delegitimisation of Israel

¹⁰ See the account of the Slansky show-trial at <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2012/01/03/60th-anniversary-slansky-trial-stalinism-anti-semitism-and-anti-zionism> and summary of Stalin's purges of Jews at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalin_and_antisemitism.

This means denying Israel's right to exist or expressing a belief that this right should be withdrawn due to Israel's policies towards the Palestinian peoples. The context of Israel itself as a nation state within the wider community of liberal democracies is important, both because Israel is being singled out in a way that other nations are not, and because it plays into historical antisemitic tropes of Jews being oppressed in part precisely because they did not have a homeland (antisemitism that criticised them for being a 'wandering people' or for not assimilating). Into this mix is sabre-rattling from Iran and other neighbours that overtly threaten Israel's existence, the impact of which people in the West may not appreciate.

While anarchists may feel annoyed about being tarred with the same brush as the rest of the Left whose statist positions we reject, we must recognise the wider context of Jewish persecution.

II. Uncritical pro-Hamas/Hizbollah positions

A key fault in occasional rhetoric from the Left is unconditional support for groups such as Hamas or Hizbollah. These groups are seen as representing the Palestinian people's struggle for national liberation. While this has an element of truth, it is based on a traditionalist, Marxist political outlook where the state (or those parties aspiring to it) is seen as the unquestionable representatives of the desires of the people. On the other hand, unconditional support means unquestioning support of the message that these groups proclaim and its antisemitic and fundamentalist content. There are two arguments around this:

(a) "Hamas, etc. represent the legitimate aspiration of the Palestinian people."

This is true *within* the liberal democratic framework of electoral politics where, however much people disagree with their politics, there is an implicit right for these parties to govern and speak on behalf of their peoples' aspirations because they have been duly elected – just as the Tories in the United Kingdom do...

The problem is defining Hamas, Fatah and Hizbollah as *equivalent* to the Palestinian peoples. Though less an issue for anarchists who have the political tools to see past the hierarchies and dubious politics within these groups, an uncritical acceptance in some quarters over the years has tarnished the Left as a whole.¹¹ However, while criticism of these parties is legitimate, it should not be used as an argument to hinder Palestinian aspirations to sovereignty and self-determination.

(b) "It is only a symbol."

Chanting "We are all Hizbollah!"¹² at a demo critical of Israeli government policies or painting that name outside a synagogue¹³ is a way some have chosen to show solidarity with the Palestinian peoples, using the political parties as a symbol of the resistance. It is not nuanced and effectively expresses open alignment with the antisemitic politics of these groups. It does not matter that this may not be the intention of those sending the 'message', but that it is likely to be perceived in that way, if indeed it can be perceived in any other way.

III. Jews should know better

This is an insidious form of antisemitism as it appears, on a superficial level, to be justified. It is a variant often encountered in anarchist spaces. The premise is, that given the Holocaust, there is no

¹¹ See, for example, Steve Cohen's book for early incarnations of this, and latterly, the work of David Hirsh and others criticising this on the Engage Online website.

¹² The use of this slogan received particular outcry having appeared on the Stop the War Coalition march in London on 5 August, 2006. See for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/5246790.stm> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/08/weareallhizbollahnowreall>. The slogan has subsequently appeared on al Quds Day marches; e.g. see photos at <http://thecommune.co.uk/2008/09/29/photo-report-on-al-quds-day-demonstration/>

¹³ See image at <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/blog/article.php?id=622>

excuse for the Jews not 'learning' an abhorrence of all oppression.¹⁴

It is a position that imposes a particular framework as to how people should react to a traumatic event, dictating how they should behave rather than allowing them agency to respond emotionally. It is also patronizing in that it collectivises the experience, seeing all Jews as a homogeneous group who experienced or reacted to the Holocaust in the same way. Further, it also assumes that Israel = Jews, because it was the Jewish people (or, more often than not, the Ashkenazi) who experienced the Holocaust, whereas the criticism is being made in relation to Israeli government policy.

As well as being implicitly racist, it obscures the roles of capitalism, imperialism and political elites from many different quarters in shaping the Conflict, historically and in the present.

That there are Jews who believe that there should be genocidal behaviour toward the Palestinian peoples is a separate issue to be tackled on its own, not by reference to other massacres. It is not a reason for others to politicize the Holocaust or use it as an argument for imposing a particular outlook. It is more appropriate to support those fighting the politicization of the Holocaust, including those within Jewish communities.

2.4 Israel

Many debates simplify the history, culture and politics of Israel. April Rosenblum pamphlet demonstrates that things are far more complicated and cannot be ignored as inconvenient or irrelevant. The present day state of Israel was created as a pressing response to a history of oppression. We cannot dismiss or diminish the impact of the Holocaust, Eastern European pogroms, or the long histories of antisemitism in the West. While Jews have found greater acceptance now than throughout history, the reverberations of that past are still very much with us. Israel represents safety and aspiration for many Jews, whether they live there or not.

One cannot reduce every Israeli Jew to the policies of Israel's rulers; something anarchists know as well as anyone, given our recognition of the deviousness of governments and elites. Like anywhere else, Israeli-Jewish society is full of its own diversity and has its own multitude of problems, such as racial oppression of non-Ashkenazi Jews, class issues, religious elitism and so on.

While many Jews identify with the concept of an Israeli state, it does not mean that they necessarily support its policies. Indeed, groups are emerging from within Jewish communities worldwide to take a more critical stance, challenging the hegemonic position of older organisations over their uncritical support of the Israeli government, their accompanying move to the right wing and their Islamophobia. Conversely, there is a need for those challenging Left-wing antisemitism from within the Left to recognise these trends in Jewish communities and to work with these groups.

Unfortunately, the antisemitic narrative has been picked up by the pro-Israel right who twist these positions to characterise criticism of Israeli government as antisemitism. The result is that antisemitism itself is being politicized and used within Jewish communities as an accusation flung against critics. The way around this is clarity of positions and for the battle to be fought on all fronts. Thus, those of us challenging antisemitism also need to recognise misuse of the term, including use of the term 'self-hating Jew'.

Related is the complaint that Israel is being singled out in a way that other states are not (referred to as 'exceptionalism'). It is less common now, given it is a tacit admission of wrong-doing. This accusation ignores all the many other campaigns that anarchists and others are engaged in supporting and have been active on over the last few decades, albeit in different fashions – one only has to think of campaigns around West Papua and Tibet or the support for struggles of indigenous peoples the Zapatista uprising, South Africa itself and the US Civil Rights movement.

¹⁴ There is a possible subtext from a Jewish perspective, that the Holocaust was about teaching the Jews a lesson.

Worth recognising is that many things which Israel is criticised for apply equally to other states, for example racist immigration policies. This is not a trap that anarchists tend to fall for, given the breadth of their critique of the state, but it is something that other sections of the Left and liberal centre are susceptible to, particularly when they fail to acknowledge how they benefit from privileges based on the similar discrimination politics within their own countries.

2.5 The Palestinian Peoples

The Palestinian peoples are not a united whole but a name that has been applied to the non-Jewish, indigenous population of Palestine. Like all peoples they are diverse both culturally and politically. Their elected representatives do not represent the entirety of opinion or desire. What they share is a common oppression and a common interest in resisting it. Use of the term Arab for the Palestinian peoples is problematic as it is not necessarily how they self-identify and because it is used within Israel to marginalise the Palestinians – though it can be used by them for political expediency.

The scope of their history and resistance is outside of this article, though it is important in its own right. For my purposes, the starting point is that the Palestinian peoples are diverse, with their own long histories and connections with the land. Thus, in the dominant framework of liberal-democratic politics, they have legitimate national aspirations. It is also the case that in the Conflict it is the ordinary Palestinian peoples who bear the brunt of the suffering from the military conflict and who experience the day-to-day reality of Israeli policies. Understanding the role of their voice, and whether it is even heard, is a key aspect of unpicking the difficulties of the Conflict.

3. Application of Principles of Anti-Racism

There is considerable racism on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, including their various supporters. While commentators often state that they are anti-racist, it's clear that they, anarchists included, have little concept of what the politics of anti-racism actually mean.

For many, racism is just about openly expressed beliefs or politics of discrimination, such as the use of derogatory names or the denigration of an entire race. As a result, anti-racism tends to focus on these overt forms, leading to a belief in many quarters that confronting overt, personalised forms of racism is sufficient for an anti-racist politic.¹⁵

The last few decades have seen significant developments with deeper understanding of discourses of privilege emerging. There has been an exploration of ingrained systematic oppressions that are much harder to expose and challenge. These developments produce a practice of confronting the privileges of other groups in relation to the oppressed, e.g. economic, access to resources, etc., but from a cultural perspective. Underlying them is a more general theory of how we relate to different self-defined groups, ethnic or otherwise.

It presents anti-racism from the point of view of the oppressed, rather than imposing outside norms on how resistance should be conducted or what change is necessary. In particular, it demonstrates why it is not appropriate for people with privilege to impose political positions on the oppressed to suit their own desires and beliefs, thus effectively maintaining their privileges at the cost of the empowerment of others.

The politics of anti-racism deserve a whole publication to themselves¹⁶, but I shall explore aspects of it using the Israeli context to draw out subtler issues.

¹⁵ It may be useful to recognise that *anti-racist* can be interpreted as being against racist individuals; while *anti-racism* implies the wider concept of being against the whole system of racism.

¹⁶ See People of Color Organize (www.peopleofcolororganize.com/category/analysis), Paul Kivel (www.paulkivel.org), the Katrina Reader (katrinareader.org/legacies), Resist Racism (resistracism.wordpress.com/racism-101), and Racial Equality Tools (www.raciaequalitytools.org). These sites are US-focused and do not necessarily translate to other contexts; though useful starting points for people seeking a deeper understanding of anti-racism being put into practice.

3.1 Giving Voice and Respect

Central to modern anti-racist practice is the recognition that the oppressed must have the right to speak for themselves. It is not up to others to dictate how a struggle should be conducted or whose words get heard.

Part of the freedom to have a voice is the right to determine what your oppression is. It is not for the privileged to decide what is or is not racist or oppressive. This does not mean unconditional acceptance of those decisions; it has to be taken into account, for example, the way antisemitism has become a tool used by elites. However, it does require that we approach those decisions with respect, attempt to understand contested terms and accept that the oppression is real even if we cannot clearly demarcate its boundaries.

There is a duty of care, respect and enquiry from the privileged to groups suffering discrimination. Thus, outside those directly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, there is a requirement to respect the experiences of Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism and of antisemitism. Likewise, in showing solidarity there is a need to avoid offering support to positions that maintain privileges. Within the Conflict, this care is not letting discrimination from one perspective become an excuse for behaviour that itself becomes oppressive to others, something that applies to all sides.

If there is one thing to take away, it is the ability to ask the question of oneself: in expressing myself, am I doing it from a position of privilege; am I seeking to impose my beliefs on others? This is not to say that if the answer is yes, it is necessarily wrong (as an anarchist, I have no problem expressing my political opposition to authoritarian and hierarchical belief systems), but it may have to be put with an awareness of the sensitivities of the context.

3.2 Challenging Privilege and the Changing Nature of Racism

Often anti-racist practice works on unspoken sets of assumptions or 'rational' arguments; for instance, it is sufficient to name the privilege to abolish it or that racism is easily defined and so easily rooted out. Unfortunately, these are rarely true. Antisemitism shows how racism changes and adapts to dominant paradigms. Thus, while history is useful in identifying the paths of antisemitism, it cannot provide hard and fast definitions.

Confronting racism effectively involves challenging its roots in the maintenance of privilege. Those who benefit from privilege will often seek to subvert anti-racist agendas, sometimes subconsciously, to protect that privilege. Likewise, there are those who see gain in divisions, even if they are on the 'discriminated' side. This is true of many struggles of national liberation, anti-colonialism and civil rights, not just of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

As result, anti-racism, including antisemitism, means different things to different people. This does not mean we have to accept every viewpoint. We can have our own critical analysis, but it requires that we first listen to the voices coming from the oppressed groups and approach their arguments with open minds rather than trying to fit them into our preferred boxes.

This demands an ability to respect, which in anarchism is tied in with the key principle of equality. It means just as much the ability to differ as to agree, but also looking for practical ways to offer solidarity rather than demanding those less privileged conform to our political expectations. Achieving equality is a process that involves both sides. I cannot just decide that I am your equal; both of us have to agree that we are equal and acting as such.

3.3 Inadvertent Use of Racist Imagery

On several occasions I experienced conversations where it was argued that the swastika should be 'reclaimed' as it was originally an ancient sun symbol. It is not up to us to 'reclaim' a symbol which represents great pain and oppression, and which is still used in that sense. Those seeking to reclaim speak from a position of privilege and effectively deny the discriminated group their experience. The pain it symbolises is real; only by understanding and working with the wishes of those who experienced it do we acknowledge it in ways that are more than just lip-service – this lip-service being an expression of privilege in itself.

Though the swastika is the best known (it is not possible to distinguish Nazism from antisemitism), there are other images relating historical antisemitism such as the vampire squid, the fat Jewish banker, a Jew eating a child or bathing in blood. This presents problems as the underlying imagery with the racial aspects stripped out remains powerful and has appropriate uses in other contexts.

Thus, not every example of a vampire squid stuck on a seat of power is antisemitic – the same image can arise independently without the Jewish connection, but that does not mean that the image does not have a resonance. So when pointed out that there is this connection, it is not sufficient to say that "oh, that was not my intention, so it does not matter". Not meaning to be racist does not deal with the fact that you have used something with a racist connotation, inadvertently or otherwise. Rather, refusing to acknowledge that it does and persisting in using it, thereby ignoring the racist trope, is the point where you cross the line into active racism.

Care does need to be taken here just as much by those seeking out images of antisemitism. Not every fat banker is necessarily a fat Jewish banker, for instance. There are points at which the border is indistinct between standard images and those with an antisemitic agenda. Furthermore, assuming that every greedy banker is a representation of a Jewish banker can actually reinforce the trope of linking bankers and Jews, while letting all those many greedy white Anglo-Saxons, who form the greater number of capitalists and bankers, off the hook.

Two wrongs make a right-winger of you

Another racist use of imagery is to use a racist trope as a way of highlighting an injustice. For example, people use the blood libel issue, arguing it is appropriate to use this form of antisemitic imagery as an analogy with what Israel is doing to the Palestinians. (Similarly, images which merge the swastika with the star of David). However, the blood libel applies to all Jews, not just Israeli Jews, and thus has resonances outside of the Israeli-Palestine Conflict. This approach is more commonly seen in right-wing circles as a way of justifying their own racist positions.

3.4 Climbing Into Bed with a Racist

Though you may be avowedly anti-racist, if you ally with racist groups you offer them tacit support. Often when creating a broad political church one risks alliances with groupings whose politics are very much opposed to your own. This is particularly problematic among movements that aim to be populist in nature (Occupy, Socialist Workers, etc).

Given the contested nature of antisemitism and anti-Zionism as terms, avoiding this can be a tricky feat; there will always be debate around it. While it is easy to reject groups that are overtly racist, not every group has thought-out political positions, or their spokespeople may make questionable statements. Most important, is that allies are constructively challenged when issues appear and it is made clear from the beginning what is required for alliances or support to be granted.

A criticism of this approach is that it sets one set of voices over others around that issue or grants privileges to the discriminated group at the expense of others. This is only true if we treat that group as a single entity with no difference of opinion, a discriminatory stance within itself, or that we

ignore other issues such as class. Within the Jewish and Palestinian communities there are a large number of different voices and some interesting historical strategies in play.¹⁷

A simplistic approach has led to particular voices being seized upon in order to justify political positions by those taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. It is very difficult terrain to navigate, for while someone cannot be said to stand for every single member of their race, it can also be said that they may represent a body of opinion to some degree, especially if associated with a given organisation.

This means actively looking at the principles underlying positions rather than seeing a stated objective as the unifying factor. This more nuanced response means that we would say, have the ability to reject the position of the religious Jewish anti-Israel group Neturai Karta¹⁸ while maintaining our own anti-statist position.

Ultimately, there is no easy formula that can be applied. Each case will depend on context. However, the statements, which from an anarchist perspective at least, have come across as strongest, are not those who rely on the works of individual spokespeople, but speak in support of people in general, in recognising difference and privilege rather than shying away from it, and which speak directly from their politics. The Czech Anarchist Federation statement in this collection is a good example.

4. Critiques of Liberal Approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

A significant problem in debating the issues around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that they cannot be reduced to a class analysis. This means many analytic tools are not appropriate, so some of us of the more radical, non-authoritarian bent may fall back on the traditional liberal formulations which already inform much of the wider, public debate.

It is hard for us as anarchists to put forward our positions when they are not recognised by the main players, in particular where many of the points of resistance to the injustices of the conflict assume a liberal or statist perspective. However, groups such as Anarchists Against The Wall demonstrate there are practical ways of intervening that create effective challenges to oppression without falling into the pitfalls.¹⁹

4.1 International Law

A large amount of writing and blogging about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict focuses on UN resolutions critical of Israel or attempts to cite international and human rights law. This includes the criminalisation of Apartheid within international law.

International laws and resolutions are externally-imposed constructs. They do not ask the people directly what they want, what they would consider justice. Tribunals under international law impose norms constructed from a Eurocentric position. On a deeper level, it fails to acknowledge the inherent power relationships that riddle the international organisations or recognise their biases.

From another perspective, appeals to international law are seen as an attack on the legitimacy of Israel, though this depends on working within the framework of liberal democratic institutions. In

¹⁷ For example, the 'whisper tactics' of many establishment Jewish organisations, which deal with antisemitism behind the scenes rather than drawing public attention to it, or the pan-European politics of assimilation which for many years formed a distinct political grouping in opposition to the Zionist movement within Jewish communities.

¹⁸ An ultra-orthodox Jewish sect who believe that the Jewish can only be formed when the Messiah comes. Its rabbis have courted controversy such as meeting with Ahmadinejad. See <http://www.nkusa.org/activities/Statements/20070402IranWhycfm.cfm>

¹⁹ See *We are all Anarchists against the Wall!*, 2004, http://zinelibrary.info/files/anarwall_EN.pdf

using terms such as 'occupying force' or calling the actions of its government illegitimate, it is criticising the ability of Israel to follow its own path, but saying that it must subject itself to a global power structure.

While for anarchists much of this is patently ridiculous, it does make a form of sense from a liberal viewpoint. If Israel is not to be singled out for special treatment under the liberal paradigm, it should be as subject to international law as any other state. If not, it exacerbates the feelings of injustice and powerlessness of Palestinians who have pinned hopes on such frameworks.

If we as anarchists do support Palestinians in this argument, it does no harm to point out that many politicians in the West who place much store in these institutions to justify their own privileges, power and right of interference have their own abuses to answer for and regularly attempt to ignore or subvert the same institutions for their own agendas.

4.2 States & Nationhood

States and nations are two clearly intertwined ideas which developed as part of the liberal democratic ideology. As Mark Neocleous argues in *Imagining the State*, they connect with mythology and land.²⁰ States need concepts of nations and cultural identity, even those based on citizenship (e.g. Britain, France) rather than ethnicity (e.g. Germany). In forging a state there is a construction of a relationship to the land it occupies through the use of mythology; it is this latter aspect which also ties in, and even requires, the concept of a nation (or ethnic grouping) which can claim some ancient connection to the land and a kinship in the present.

Throughout the Enlightenment the nation played a key symbolic role in the struggles for emancipation from feudal landlords and so became an accepted condition for freedom. Hence, for the liberal-democratic state to exist with the freedoms that are claimed for it, the nation must come first. Zionism is inherently a position within this ideology.

Socialist states tried to overcome the mythological and ethnic basis of the nation through assimilation. That required assimilation to the existing dominant culture, and so became a form of oppression.

The upshot of these often obscured dynamics is that land becomes central to identity and to struggles, even when it is hidden behind other notions, including religion. Much of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict occurs around ownership of property – land and resources, over who has 'ownership' and the rights. This has allowed capitalists (and the politicians who support them) to exploit these resources and the various peoples while using the religion and race to hide or even justify their exploitation. This is where class analysis comes into its own in this context.

Thus, solutions which do not address land and mythology, or create artificial borders cannot provide long term peace. Yet many arguments are predicated on assumptions of sovereignty over land and on cultural mythologies shaped by intellectual elites with their own agendas, rather than actually challenging them. It is a case of the 'master's tools not being able to dismantle the master's house'.

Anti-antisemitic campaigns develop problems here, a particular instance being Engage's founding statement which states "*Jews have as much right to be nationalist as anybody else*".²¹ Correct within the liberal ideological perspective but troubling to the anarchist.

The line of political thought that sees the right of self-determination for Jews requires the same right for the Palestinians. To deny this is to single out one group over another for greater privilege, essentially a racist position. However, most campaigns for self-determination will struggle to avoid elements of ethno-nationalism, and thus it is not hard to see that the nation-state itself is open to

²⁰ See also Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People* for a discussion of this in relation to Israel and the Jewish people.

²¹ <http://www.engageonline.org.uk/archives/index.php?id=14>

contamination by elements of racism by its very nature.

This problem of nationalism in anti-antisemitic criticism is not just a recent one but, as Moishe Postone points out, has been present from the beginning of Zionism, such as the debates over the merits of Zionism and a homeland for Jewish people within the (Askhenazi) Jewish Left.²²

Anarchists are good at avoiding these problems when the principles of anarchism are applied coherently. However, it is worth remembering the underlying assumptions feeding much of the liberal positions and the consequences that they have. Addressing imperialism, capitalism and political elites needs to include recognition that these sit upon a deeper set of assumptions successfully normalised to the extent that they are not questioned, but which maintain the privileges of those who benefit. As anarchists it is a powerful point of intervention if we can be heard.

4.3 Anti-War/Imperialism

Some of those campaigning around antisemitism have a valid fear is that the anti-imperialism and the anti-war movement in general is fertile ground for antisemitism to take hold. However, Israel is a significant partner of the US and is its number one recipient of aid, including military. It is also clearly able to demonstrate its own agency and independent military action. As such, the Israeli government should rightly be criticised for its actions and words.

So it is important to maintain vigilance and to avoid a point-scoring approach that allows those who would like to see Israel demonized or all Jews tainted by association to slip their message in. Simplistic positions allow opportunities for the 'all-powerful Jewish lobby' trope (section 2.2). On the other hand, it is clearly equally tempting for defenders of Israeli policy to use antisemitic accusations to quell such opposition, leading to charge and counter-charge moving the debate away from the original criticism.

This is currently important due to Israel's increasingly belligerent posturing toward Iran and equally strident language coming from anti-war groups. We should be wary of use of language which denies agency to either Israel or the US or plays into antisemitic or more general racist tropes, as they both are clearly actors with their own agendas.

4.4 Racism within Progressive Campaign Groups

Many people involved in these groups are regularly guilty of racism, explicit and implicit, against each side. Pro-Israel or anti-antisemitic groups have a strong tendency to ignore Palestinian voices, while trumpeting their own anti-racist credentials.

Anti-antisemitic groups such as Engage have successfully highlighted antisemitic tendencies among the Left so they could be countered. On the down side, their lack of engagement with voices coming from the Palestinian community in this process effectively excluded the latter so the dialogue becomes focused solely around the trope of antisemitism itself. My perception is that they are failing to recognize aspects of their own privilege.

Palestinian groups and their support campaigns have been equally problematic, often in terms of their uncritical alliances. For example, the debates around Gilad Atzmon (see section 5.3 below). The distinct lack of critical politics results in stark positions; so while many involved have good intentions it is easy for them to slip into rhetoric and alliances that cross boundaries. There is also regular reliance on the 'Jews should know better' argument to justify this.

²² *Zionism, anti-semitism and the left (an interview with Moishe Postone)*, Martin Thomas / WorkersLiberty.org, 2010.

4.5 Israel as an Ethnocracy

A problem generated by the liberal perspective is the nature of the Israeli state. It presents itself as a liberal democratic state based on citizenship, which is one of the reasons it rejects the Apartheid analogy, but it clearly has laws biased toward those who define as Jews. It has many other institutionalised policies that undeniably discriminate against Palestinians.

It is hard to counter this argument without coming up against the issue that challenging it is effectively an exercise in the delegitimisation of Israel. There are two competing needs here: (i) to recognise that the Jews have the right to self-determination; and (ii) recognizing that Israeli is inherently biased toward Jews to the disadvantage of a non-Jewish indigenous population. That this can happen is one of the inherent contradictions that can develop within liberal ideology.

This leaves the liberal approach in a bind if it is to be consistently anti-racist, for to reject its racist nature is tantamount to rejecting the Jewish foundation of the state, regardless of whatever socialist heritage may be claimed via the Labor Zionist movement, and that is an exercise in delegitimisation. It is always going to be a struggle to reform the state in this situation, even before we start applying the anarchist critiques of hierarchy.

A criticism of this position from some quarters is that it is antisemitic to call Israel a racist state. This statement ignores the fact that Palestinians are part of making this identification. There is thus an onus on those rejecting this claim, such as Israeli citizens, to recognize their position of privilege. As with all forms of racism, part of a consistent anti-racism is recognising that in a racist society there are inherent privileges granted to some groups of people because of who they are, whether they asked for it or not. It does not matter if some people have more privilege than oneself; what does is that one has an attribute that grants privileges others do not have (e.g. the right to pass through a border; the ability to walk down a street and not be harassed). Actively denying that one has that privilege is more than just disrespect, but is potentially racist because it denies the reality of oppression. However, there are those who will seek to use the racist claim to delegitimize Israel, so an awareness of context will always be required.

Ethnocracies

It is worth noting that it is near impossible to find a state that is not racist in some way. This is obvious for any state which relies on an ethnic definition for its identity, as recognised above. But it is as true of 'enlightened' modern liberal democracies as any other. Even states that are supposedly 'citizen' based can readily be shown to have institutionalised racist policies, often around policing, education and immigration. I would argue that there is no way out of this bind; the anarchist has the opportunity to argue that a key component to creating a non-racist world is through abolition of states. Even if the state is a protector of rights in the short term, it is always open to pressures, social and economic, that undermine any such commitment.

5. Contemporary Issues

By now it should be apparent there are two salient issues when discussing antisemitism in the context of the Israeli-Palestine Conflict.

- 1) It not possible to see the Conflict in isolation. It feeds into world-wide affairs, including antisemitism and is manipulated by various elites and groups for their own purposes.
- 2) There is an undercurrent of de-privileging the voice of grassroots Palestinians, including on the Left. This is often a result of an either-or politics where the position of one side is justified, while ignoring the impact that it has on the other side, or undermining their voice.

In this section we look at some of the main issues of debate that have arisen over the last few years.

5.1 The Apartheid comparison

The proposition that Israel is an apartheid state is one that raises considerable upset. For some, it is a way of adequately describing the situation on the ground in the OPT (and the Occupied Syrian Golan), using an expression that retains the emotive power it deserves.²³ For others, it is a way of demonising Israel and thus crosses the line to delegitimization and hence antisemitism.

Part of the problem is that there is no recognised Palestinian state, so in the occupied territories, Israel is a colonial-occupying power.

From the pro-Israeli side, there have been attempts to use legalistic arguments to say why the comparison is inappropriate. However, prominent anti-Apartheid campaigners are equally forthright that what is taking place in Palestine and in Israel itself is tantamount to the same thing, including the Jewish South African activist Ronnie Kasrils.

Those justifying the argument can rely on two things. Firstly, that the analogy is made by the people suffering the oppression. Secondly, the criticism is not necessarily against the state of Israel but rather its policies. However, those policies are greatly informed by the ethnic-based nature of the democracy in Israel with all the problems that throws up.

An advantage of the apartheid comparison is that it allows for movement away from comparisons with the Holocaust.

Responses

The standard responses are

- Israel is a citizen-based state: it is egalitarian because its laws say so.
- South Africa had a formalised oppression of people, i.e. the Apartheid was constitutional.
- In Israel, Jews are the predominant people, unlike white people in South Africa.
- There is scope for elected representatives that are non-Jewish.

These responses rely on appeals to the formalities of international conventions and law. Effectively, they form a position that oppression does not exist unless it is formally recognised as such. This implies that it is okay to pay lip-service to the norms of international law while continuing with systematic oppression.

The responses also fail to acknowledge the experiences of systematic, institutionalised discrimination. They dismiss the concerns of those being oppressed, particularly without putting forward alternatives – or alternatives that maintain their own privileges. They impose frameworks on the oppressed which seek to constrain how they should resist, without acknowledging the conditions in which they live. Critics of the comparison are selective in citing differences with South Africa which support their own viewpoint, so the underlying process remains one of non-engagement with Palestinian voices excluded when they say there *is* a comparison.

To the oppressed it must be insulting to have their suffering reduced to semantic and legalistic arguments. Not acknowledging these flaws in the legalistic position is tantamount to condoning it, so this approach is something which could be argued to be a racist position in itself.

Various commentators put forward the position that the apartheid analogy is counter-productive as it puts Israel on the defensive. Again, this speaks from the perspective of the privileged, as it implicitly prioritises the concerns of Israelis over Palestinians.

²³ Israel and the Crime of Apartheid: Towards a Comprehensive Analysis, *al-Majdal* 47, 2011, <http://www.badil.org/>

5.2 The Boycott, Divestments & Sanctions Campaign

The BDS campaign has come under attack for perceived delegitimizing of Israel.

As a campaign it avoids a number of criticisms of previous solidarity movements. Rather than coming from Hamas, Fatah, etc., it is based upon a general call from within Palestinian civil society. In its original version it called for a blanket boycott of all Israeli institutions. Over time it has developed more nuanced strands – large sections of those taking up with the call have moved to positions where boycotts focus on direct misappropriation of resources from the Occupied Territories.²⁴ This has allowed a more direct connection between action and on-the-ground oppression as well as circumventing issues of antisemitism.

Its broad appeal and roughly decentralised nature does mean some supporters are expressing views that demonise of Israel or outright antisemitism. When this ties into an uncritical position where anyone supporting the BDS campaign is a 'fellow traveller', then problems can arise. There has been a failure within the campaign to recognise that antisemitism is an issue and to make efforts to ensure it does not become part of their narrative.

Israeli government policy has also sought to label the campaign as antisemitic, in part to legitimise its 2011 *Law for Prevention of Damage to State of Israel through Boycott*, making supporting the BDS a crime – even though it is supported by many Jewish groups. This makes it harder to fight antisemitism on the progressive Left as legitimate critique is likely to be seen as playing to the Israeli government rather than a genuine concern to counter antisemitism.

The Academic Boycott

This is not to say that the same argument applies to all Israeli institutions. An active debate within Palestinian society is around *normalisation* and in particular how Israeli seeks to portray itself as a *normal* place. Judith Butler in her talk *The Anarchist Turn*²⁵ refers to the role of academia in this, but care must be taken in distinguishing between the roles of institutions and individuals whose politics may be completely separate.

A counter argument which raises valid concerns is how the call for a boycott of Israeli academics is perceived, particularly where done solely on grounds of citizenship of Israel – and, by extension, of them being Jewish. Such protests could easily spill over into antisemitism. There are many resources online debating the pros and cons of this call from all perspectives.

The original academic boycott called for in the UK was a ham-fisted affair, which is what opened it to the charges of antisemitism in the first place. Though the call has developed since then, it remains a contested issue as to whether it can avoid being antisemitic. It is one of those areas that are hard to make a judgement call on, and it is down to people to make up their own minds.

5.3 Gilad Atzmon

Israeli born jazz saxophonist and pro-Palestinian activist, Atzmon has been a figure of contention for some time. Supported by the traditional Left in a number of places, he has come under criticism from the likes of the Jewish Socialist Group (UK), Jews for Justice for Palestinians and others for his anti-Jewish stance and for crossing the line to into antisemitism.²⁶ Often he does not distinguish

²⁴ See, for example, *Targeting Israeli Apartheid*, Tom Anderson, et al / CorporateWatch, 2012.

²⁵ Online at <http://blip.tv/adcs/tac-judithbutler-5202151>. Though, normalisation of capitalism, the Iraq & Afghanistan invasions and so on are also something that UK and US universities have been complicit in. Something, which puts Butler as a professor at UC Berkeley, in an interesting place. Thanks to Josh Robinson for this point.

²⁶ (i) Open letter from US anti-racist campaigners <http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2012-03-03/not-quite-ordinary-human-beings->

between Jews and Israel as a whole but actively conflates them.

Selected writings and issues:

1. *I do not consider the Jews to be a race, and yet it is obvious that 'Jewishness' clearly involves an ethno-centric and racially supremacist, exclusivist point of view that is based on a sense of Jewish 'chosen-ness'. Zionism too, is a clear manifestation of such an ideology.*²⁷
2. *"The attack on the aid convoy [Gaza aid flotilla] is a continuum of the same ideology that killed Christ. Christ's killing is a symbol of a brutal assault against goodness, in the same way the attack on the aid convoy was against humanity and compassion."*
"My studies have shown me that the Jewish identity is foreign to humanism, it is tribal and has evolved as an outcome of an exilic culture." He argues that we can learn a lot about Jewish collective ideology by looking closely to the biblical "Story of Esther" which he argues teaches Jews the art of infiltration into politics and governments... *"This form of infiltration is clearly evident in America today where the Jewish lobby (AIPAC) dominates the political discourse."*
"...in fact I correct them 'I am not only a self-hater but a proud self-hater.'"
*"Instead of asking why we are hated they continue to toss accusations on others."*²⁸
3. *"I have hardly seen any Israelis or Jews attempt to understand the circumstances that led to the clear resentment of Europeans towards their Jewish neighbors in the 1920's-40's."*²⁹
4. Atzmon admits to circulating Paul Eisen's "The Holocaust Wars", a text that supports Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel.³⁰

While this might play better in Israel (I'm not saying it does), it is clearly problematic outside Israel where there are much stronger currents of antisemitism. As such, when considering his opinions and effect, one cannot focus solely on the Israel-Palestinian Conflict but must take into account the wider context.

The debates around the calls for Atzmon to be boycotted will no doubt rumble on continue. Hopefully, I have presented enough background material around antisemitism that people can make up their own minds. In my opinion, the danger of Atzmon's approach is that he provides a convenient and vocal position in support of Left action for boycotts, etc., but in a way that opens up a space for antisemitism because they actively allow criticism of all Jews. They are in danger of falling into the 'useful Jew' trope, which results in antisemitic statements being legitimized.

The Useful Jew

The 'useful Jew' is someone who is singled out for having the 'right' opinions and they are thus used to justify a political standpoint. The person is the 'lone voice of truth', or is projected as representing an entire class of people. Either way, they are singled out because their message is convenient for political purposes and the problematic views coming from that individual overlooked, a privileged position to adopt.

anti-imperialism-and-the-anti-humanist-rhetoric-of-gilad-atzmon/

(ii) "Disavowment" by Palestinian civil society: <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=467843>

²⁷ <http://www.gilad.co.uk/writings/gilad-atzmon-an-interesting-exchange-with-a-jewish-anti-zion.html>

²⁸ *Time for world to confront Israel: an interview with Gilad Atzmon*, Shabana Syed, Arab News, 2010, <http://arabnews.com/opinion/columns/article66233.ece>

²⁹ <http://www.gilad.co.uk/writings/jewish-ideology-and-world-peace-by-gilad-atzmon.html>

³⁰ <http://gilad.co.uk/html%20files/atzmongreensteindebate.html> – notes from a debate following Prof. Greenstein's challenging Atzmon's circulation of the leaflet.

5.6 States

A standard anarchist analysis from both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is that we as anarchists do not believe in states and should be able to criticize them come what may. However true, it is a position that needs care.

States are a feature of the present, practically and ideologically. It is not possible to ignore the wider context of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict or write states out because the concept does not suit us. For both sides, statehood and nationhood are key aspects of self-determination, so to be consistent in allowing both peoples agency to choose their own futures, we have to acknowledge their right to choose their own paths.

While anarchists work toward a future which will hopefully make states redundant, we cannot ignore practicalities on the ground in favour of theory if we are to show solidarity with the oppressed. This kind of argument conflates desires to show solidarity in the present with our own political hopes for the future, when actually they are not directly compatible.

So there are two challenges here; one to avoid specifically demonising Israel as a state more so than any other state; and two, to avoid supporting politics that reinforce the need for a state. A way of doing this is to recognise that there is a whole set of struggles and resistance, not from the elites of each side but coming from the grassroots. It is there, across communities, that we can offer our solidarity. We can talk about the needs of the here and now and express our hopes for the future in language that does not use commanding overtones.

It is also important to express criticism in a way that does not make implicit assumptions that Israeli government = all Israelis = all Jews.

5.7 Challenging Right-Wing Narratives on Left Campaigns and Antisemitism

Narratives from the pro-Israeli right-wing tend to identify Israel's interests with the interests of all Jews and likewise characterize all Palestinians support as supporting Hamas, etc. It is in their interest to create stark, simplistic imagery and narratives of good and bad, utilizing the very powerful charge of antisemitism when needed.

Unfortunately, the Left as a whole dropped the ball on countering antisemitism by discounting its impact in favour of supporting pro-Palestinian positions. Simplistic narratives from socialist-led campaigns in the West assumed a hierarchy which saw antisemitism as less important. This opened space for the wholesale takeover of the challenging of antisemitism by right-wing/conservative Jewish groups in US and UK and hardline religious/capitalist political parties in Israel.

A problem not recognised by left anti-antisemitic groups is how they play into right-wing agendas in the same way that they accuse left-wing campaigns of naively playing into antisemitism. This does not mean their criticism should be taken less seriously, but it is symptomatic of the flawed assumption that it is sufficient to feel that one is against racism without challenging ones own privileged position – that is, without actually having an understanding of the many subtle ways in which racism can manifest or how one benefits from various privileges.

Part of the problem comes from mis-characterising those opposed to Israeli government policies as being a uniform, united group. Anarchists, liberals and socialists are seen as having a common ideology and similar motivations. This suits a right-wing narrative, which smears everyone alike.

It is also used to attack groups from within Jewish communities who opposing Israeli government policies. This includes narratives of labelling Jewish opposition of the Israeli government as coming

attraction of the right and conspiracism to the Occupy movement. Also see Adam Ma'anit's article *A Human Balance*, New Internationalist, 2004.

from 'self-hating' Jews, or 'traitors'. Indeed, many of the progressive Jewish groups who have been on the receiving end of this sort of accusation are right to point out that this is a form of antisemitism, and just because it comes from within the Jewish community does not lessen the effect; if anything, it increases it.³⁴

Some have extrapolated this to criticize any Jew who does not identify themselves a Zionist on their standards is opened to criticism as a self-hating Jew. Thus, while there are problems with anti-Zionist positions as a cover for antisemitism, the issue is muddled by political abuse of the label by right-wing political elites, making it difficult to unpick and poisoning the atmosphere in general.

This loss of space to the right-wing needs to be challenged by the Left picking up the baton of combating antisemitism and seeing it as equal to any other form of racism. There is considerable movement in this direction from within the Jewish communities where a number of groups have formed (e.g. Independent Jewish Voices, Occupy AIPAC) to present more critical, albeit varied, stances on Israel.³⁵ Anarchists need to be more proactive in ensuring that they are working with this change rather than bolstering the interests of the right-wing.

Self-hatred

The 'self-hater' is a term that has emerged in some contexts of anti-racist studies and practice, used nominally to describe an individual who has rationalised their own oppression to the point they see it as justified and even work in its favour. Like with the 'useful Jew', they can be used by privileged groups to justify privilege and oppression.

A related term is 'Uncle Tom', the lead character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who "has become an epithet for a person who is slavish and excessively subservient to perceived authority figures, particularly a black person who behaves in a subservient manner to white people; or any person perceived to be a participant in the oppression of their own group".³⁶

Use of these terms is problematic as denying the person agency over their reaction to their oppression.³⁷ However, both have been deeply politicised within the contexts of their struggles. In black liberation struggles 'Uncle Tom' was used to criticise individuals seen as pandering to white supremacist agendas. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict advocates of the Occupation use 'self-hating Jew' accuse dissenting voices in Jewish communities of self-hatred (and by extension hating all Jews) to silence them. Without going into the pros and cons of labelling with in oppressed communities, those outside them should be wary of engaging with the term.³⁸

5.8 The Apologist Drift in Left Anti-Antisemitism

The problem of challenging antisemitism is compounded by a drift to a position of apologising for Israel in the left anti-antisemitic groupings. Wary of feeding a right-wing agenda (of the European/US variety), some commentators present Israel as a passive player – which is clearly not the situation. The use of broad strokes to describe the Left, while downplaying the Palestinian voices, has led to the centre & left-wing anti-antisemitic camp becoming criticised for crossing the

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek uses the term 'Zionist Antisemite' to describe pro-Israeli Jews who attack other Jews using the same antisemitic themes that were adopted by 19th and 20th Century antisemites. See *Anti-Semitism, Anti-Semite and Jew*, 2009, on YouTube.com

³⁵ This process is well documented on the Independent Jewish Voices of Canada, Magnes Zionist and Mondoweiss.net blogs.

³⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom

³⁷ Thanks to Tom Anderson for this point.

³⁸ Gilad Atzmon refers to himself as 'self-hating Jew' adopting that critical terminology as a matter of pride. However, this does not absolve the problematic nature of the term, its connotations or its politicization by sections of the right. See <http://www.gilad.co.uk/writings/self-haters-unite-by-gilad-atzmon.html>, <http://www.gisborneherald.co.nz/article/?id=8879>.

line to becoming pro-Israeli advocacy groups, thus damaging their otherwise valuable critical contributions.

From my reading, while giving lip-service to the fact that there can be legitimate criticism of Israeli government policy, anti-antisemitism commentators rarely put this side by side with their attacks on pro-Palestinian campaigners. Palestinian solidarity campaigners with honest intentions are simply criticized rather than being shown how they could have done it alternatively, which again gives the appearance of seeking to silence. Room for doubt is often denied.³⁹

This is a move away from the politics of earlier voices such as Steven Cohen, author of the seminal challenge to antisemitism on the left, *Funny, you don't look Anti-Semitic*. A socialist, Cohen saw himself as an "anti-Zionist Zionist", and recognised the problems inherent in Zionism. Current anti-antisemitism campaigners tend to come from the centre-left with a different take on Zionism.

The apologist drift is compounded by inappropriate liberal norms and sloppy characterization. For instance, sweeping statements about Palestinian nationalist aspirations, particularly where more extreme tendencies (i.e. more likely to get space in the right-wing press) are taken as representative of everyone. Things which would be rightfully criticized if applied to Jews.

If Palestinian aspirations to nationhood are to be questioned, then the same questions must be applied to Israel, including acknowledgement of the use of terror and violence in the founding of the Israeli state in 1948. Seeking to privilege one as acceptable or not having consequences and benefiting from that privilege, while then denying it to others is racist. One cannot claim the benefits and then say "it is all in the past, you must adapt to new norms that we will give you".

There is an inconsistency in the way pro-Israel groups require that massacres of Jews should be treated with respect yet have problems accepting, say, the Jenin massacre – for instance, trying to downplay the scale of death or criticising the Palestinian description of the founding of the state of Israel and the subsequent displacement and death of Palestinians as the Nakba ("Disaster").

While commentators paint a picture of moderate Israelis overtaken by fear and cynicism, there is only so far that responsibility or complicity can be abdicated. At some point it needs to be recognised that they set equal store on Israel being a democratic state and this democratic state has consistently voted in hawkish and right-wing governments. Using the fear and cynicism card is effectively saying that the Palestinians were originally to blame and painting Israel as passive, merely reacting to the 'problem' of Palestinians.

There have been other situations where this apologism is in danger of becoming a silencing force in its own right, including of progressive Jewish groups.⁴⁰ Likewise, there has been little to recognise or counter attacks on progressive Jewish groups by more right wing ones, which serve as attempts to shut down debate within Jewish communities that are critical of Israeli government policies. While anti-antisemitism groups such as Engage rightfully argue that simplistic stances feed into antisemitic currents, they are equally guilty of presenting a simplistic playing of the 'new antisemitism' critique. So they are, in part, helping to feed misuse of the antisemitic label to silence legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies from within and outside the Jewish communities. As well as being morally dubious, there is also a danger that the cumulative effect will be a reaction against them, in turn damaging the recognition of the dangers of new antisemitism.

³⁹ For example David Hirsh's defence of Maureen Lippman which completely ignores the fact that offence could be taken by Palestinians at her insinuation they held life cheaply, yet it is consistently his position that where offence is caused to Jews then it is fine to come down hard with the criticism of antisemitism. See his *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: Cosmopolitan Reflections*, 2007 online at <http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/2061/> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/02/stopharassingjews>.

⁴⁰ *Progressive Jewish Thought and the New Anti-Semitism*, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, of the conservative American Jewish Council.

5.9 Dictating Resistance

A significant proportion of liberal commentators who support Israeli or Zionist positions seek to impose norms on Palestinians. Particularly, what they should be doing or how they should be resisting. While recognising that there is a justification for opposition, they maintain their privileged standpoint to say what form it should take. In adhering to cherished liberal positions ('dialogue', 'non-violence', etc.) there is blindness to the practicalities. For instance, when being brutalized, a call for negotiation is a slap in the face and a failure to recognize the actual realities of occupation.

As it stands, the structures of 'dialogue' and 'negotiation' are dictated by an Israeli government that insists its demands are met first, without recognising its own role as colonizer or treating the Palestinians or their representatives as equals. The process of coming to the table is not 'mutual'.

Thus, a common reaction from Palestinians is that negotiation should not simply replicate the unequal power dynamics already in place. Demands are put in place by the stronger party actively seeking to delegitimise the weaker party's own agency and interest. It is asking someone to negotiate for peace while facing a fist: no successful solution is likely under such circumstances.

Likewise, it is simply rude to ask why other Arab countries are not doing something. Should they be should be doing something in a way that suits Israel? It also assumes there is a homogeneous pan-Arabic culture. Such statements make out that Israel is somehow faultless or distract from specific acts of discrimination. Or they imply that neighbouring Arab states bear more responsibility than Israel itself, for the refugee situation created by Israeli government policies.

5.10 Right to Return and Indigenous Populations

As it stands all Jews have a 'right to return' to Israel; that is, they can settle there and be accepted as citizens on the sole ground that they are Jewish. Palestinians who were forced to flee during the Nabka and other wars do not have this automatic right and their claims are systematically discriminated against by government policy. It is an anomalous situation that directly reflects the ethnocentric bias of the Israeli state and creates a situation where the indigenous population is treated as second-class.

To anarchists, this is problematic given that there is a no-borders position inherent in our anti-statism, so migration needs to be open. On the other hand, in the face of continued antisemitism around the world, why should Jews be denied a safe homeland?

It is not the right to migrate that is necessarily the issue but that it is not being fairly applied. As such, there tends to be an avoidance of calling for an end of the right to return *per se* in anarchist / solidarity groups on the ground, but that it should be open to all, Palestinian and Jew alike.

6. The Anarchist Heritage

It is worth quickly looking at the anarchist heritage because it has antisemitic taints of its own. Steve Cohen's work points to antisemitic remarks by Bakunin, Proudhon and some of their followers, not to speak of Marx's own abuse of 'the Jew' in his writing. There is also a semi-regular debate around whether or not Nestor Makhno was antisemitic.

Early anarchism was not immune to other political trends of its time, particularly around universality, a position which believed that culture(s) would be subsumed into politics or at least a dominant culture defined by a given politic, and which lead it down racist / antisemitic paths.

On the other hand, anarchist thought and action has a strong Jewish strand from its earliest days. At times the main anarchist newsletters in New York and London were in Yiddish. Many of those who contributed greatly to the struggle over the years were Jewish; we can point to Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman; from Gustav Landauer to Murray Bookchin, Fredy Perlman⁴¹, Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, and many more in between. The noted anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker, though not Jewish, did most of his organising within Jewish communities, and so on.

Some of our earliest thinkers were flawed and antisemitic and we can't brush that under the carpet. Refusing to acknowledge this aspect compounds the crime of antisemitism.

The strength of our political thought is that while we can draw on the work of different writers, we are not beholden to any. They are important influences on our thought, but there is an active part of our politics that prevents us from holding them up as gods and masters, as the sole repositories of truth in the way that many on the left hold Marx and Engels up as unimpeachable. We recognise the flaws, learn and move on; acknowledge without worshipping or become dependent solely on them.

Conclusion

In conclusion there is still much to be done. The first step is to educate ourselves, to understand the varied tropes of antisemitism, to learn what consistent anti-racist analysis and practice is. That is, to move from simply adopting these terms to recognising the everyday challenges in applying them. This requires all sides to be pro-active, whether Palestinian solidarity groups or those challenging antisemitism. There is also the need to recognise that the term 'antisemitism' is both poorly understood and contested which leads to a lot of bad practice.

It is easy to apportion blame to one side or another. Ultimately, this is not helpful as it assumes that one side is worse than the other, that there are not legitimate grievances to be had by both. Both sides have had difficult histories that need to be acknowledged, although the people alive now are not the people of 70 years ago. Progress is not going to be made by suppressing or rewriting the past, something which only serves the elites. Nor can one force justice by slapping international law and Western liberal norms, failing to address ongoing grievances.

While political leaders and vested interests continue to exist, this present situation is unlikely to change. At the end of the day, those most affected, those who live in the contested lands are simply trying to get on with their lives. Any future solution will require people to live side by side.

What an anarchist analysis can bring is a focus on communities and the needs of the people who live in them. Rather than abstracting the struggle so that people become objects to be criticised or romanticised at a distance, we should be working directly with the communities, building bridges rather than walls, allow a grassroots solidarity to grow that can bypass the problems that come with hierarchies. In opening this space, people can come together and develop the understanding that comes through communication and contact. Thus, the solidarity we express should always be with the people, of both sides, not those who would command their minds against the wishes of their hearts.

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⁴¹ Who wrote the interesting article *Anti-Semitism & the Beirut Pogrom*, 1983. Available at <http://libcom.org/library>